

# NEURODIVERSITY

Presented by Piedmonters for Resources, Advocacy, and Information in Special Education

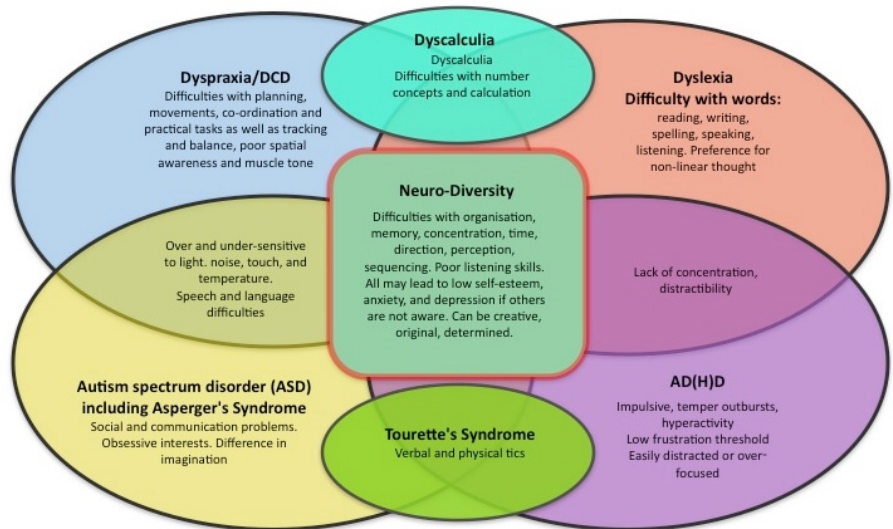
## What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that neurological differences (like those that occur in autism, learning disabilities, and developmental disorders) are part of the normal spectrum of human experience, and contribute positively to the cultural landscape. Studies show that such learning differences affect as many as 1 in 5 people. A greater awareness of neurodiversity not only helps to prevent discrimination, it opens us up to the many benefits of diversity and inclusion.

## Neurodiversity in Our Schools

Studies show that the teaching techniques developed to help students with learning differences have a positive impact on *all* students. These include differentiated learning, multisensory approaches, social skills development, and executive functioning strategies.

Equity in public education for all types of learners is guaranteed by law and supported by public funds, as well as by teams of trained staff at every public school.



## What Neurodiversity Looks Like

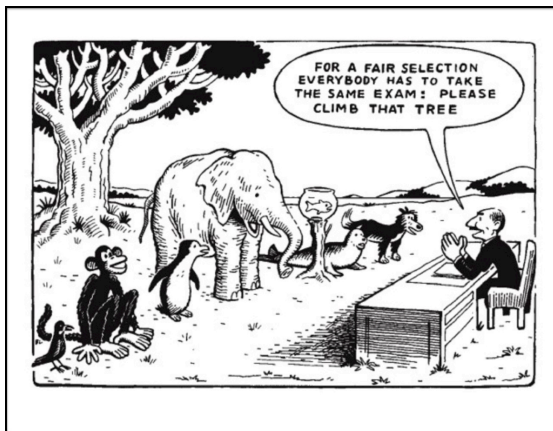
Most of the time, neurodiversity is "invisible." As a result, it's easy to misinterpret the behaviors of a person whose brain is working in different ways. For example, a person with slow auditory processing may take a long time to answer a question. On the outside, it might appear as though she's not smart, or not listening. But the extra time her brain needs to translate the question isn't related to her intelligence or her hearing. Other myths include the idea that people with autism lack empathy or don't want friends (in fact they just have a harder time reading social cues), or that ADHD is just a fancy word for high-energy kids (in fact it is a condition affecting the regulatory functions of the brain).

In most cases, neurodiverse experiences are simply more "extreme" versions of typical processing. We all have moments where we feel out of synch, overwhelmed, unfocused, irritable, or at a loss for words. For a person with atypical neurology, these feelings may occur much more frequently or intensely. For example, loud noises are irritating to most people, but a person with sensory processing disorder may be just as strongly affected by *ambient* noise. For a person with dyspraxia, getting dressed in the morning might feel as complicated as assembling a bookshelf from IKEA. The diagram above will give you a general idea of some common experiences of people with neurological differences.

These same sensitivities and neural "detours" can also make a person more perceptive, creative, dedicated, intelligent, or intuitive, because specific areas of the brain are more active or send signals through different pathways. Neurodiversity exposes us to new perspectives, just like cultural, socioeconomic, and age differences do.

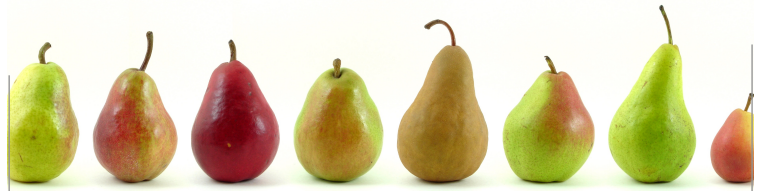
## What You Should Know

- ◆ **Actions that come automatically for you may be difficult for others.** This includes things like the ability to balance on your chair, calm yourself down, remember faces, listen and write notes at the same time, or figure out how to begin a conversation. You can't usually tell by looking at someone how their brain processes information.
- ◆ **If you know someone with consistently unexpected behavior** (such as bouncing while walking, speaking too loudly, not saying "hi," difficulty reading or writing, or getting upset for "no reason"), **chances are they are aware of the issue and actively working on it**, just like we all work on our personal challenges.
- ◆ **Every person wants to be included.** People with neurological differences often have a harder time expressing their ideas or emotions, but this doesn't mean they don't have them. In fact, people with learning differences are often more sensitive, more intelligent, or more creative than average.



*Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.*

-Albert Einstein



## What You Can Do

The side-effects of atypical neurology can seem strange, annoying, or unfortunate to people who don't really understand them. It is this misunderstanding that causes the majority of problems for neurodiverse people. Ellen Notbohm sums up the problem pretty well in *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*:

*Like any person, I can't learn in an environment where I'm constantly made to feel that I'm not good enough and that I need fixing. I avoid trying anything new when I'm sure all I'll get is criticism, no matter how 'constructive' you think you're being. Look for my strengths and you will find them. There is more than one right way to do most things.*

Here are some simple things you can do to be more aware of the strengths of others:

- ◆ Be patient when someone needs more time to communicate, focus, transition, or calm down.
- ◆ Be open to multiple forms of communication, including visual and kinesthetic.
- ◆ Many "rude" or "strange" behaviors are unintentional; assume there is a reason and a meaning behind every action.
- ◆ People with communication difficulties have a harder time making friends and joining in, so try inviting a new person to an activity or party.
- ◆ Share your positive and empathetic thoughts about people with differences.

### For more information and ideas:

- ◆ <https://www.understood.org>
- ◆ <http://www.ldonline.org/ldbasics/whatisld>
- ◆ <http://autisticadvocacy.org>